

# THE BULGARIAN LANGUAGE AND ITS CULTURAL ENCODING

by  
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This paper is an attempt to look into Bulgarian linguistic phrases in which extralinguistic, cultural, historical and literary backgrounds are embedded and then to see, to some extent, Bulgarians' view of the world through the phrases. The paper deals with the most commonly used linguistic expressions that a foreigner learning the Bulgarian language and living in Bulgaria encounters.

Those phrases are extremely interesting, but a full understanding of them requires in-depth knowledge, not only about the linguistic meaning itself, but also about the Bulgarian traditional outlook of the world, folklore, customs, culture, symbolism and so on. The author tries to say that foreign language learning and teaching is a complex process which incorporates all the aspects of the life of the speakers of the language.

## *1. Introduction*

My wife and I arrived in Sofia, September 1990. I was the first South Korean to come to study in Bulgaria. Before that time, Bulgaria and the Republic of Korea were ideological enemies. In Seoul, I could not get any information about Bulgaria, the Bulgarian people, the language, nor the culture. It was really hard work for the two of us to learn Bulgarian and to get accustomed to a totally unfamiliar foreign culture.

During the very first days in Sofia, my wife and I had to use the taxi service because we did not know the public transportation system. We stopped an empty taxi and told the driver our destination. The taxi driver shook his head horizontally, which we understood as a refusal to take us in the taxicab. We ran to get another taxi, but the next driver made the same gesture, which we naturally understood, again, as a refusal to take us in the cab. We were upset, thinking that the Bulgarian taxi drivers were extremely impolite. So we had to look for a third taxi which would give us a ride. The events made us see that the Bulgarians made the opposite head gestures, in order to express 'yes' or 'no'. This is just one example of many extralinguistic cultural phenomena, compared to ours, which foreigners, including me, encounter in their daily lives in Bulgaria.

This paper is an attempt to look into linguistic phrases under which a Bulgarian cultural background lies. These phrases are extremely interesting to foreigners who are learning the Bulgarian language. Attempts will be made to explain these phrases and to examine their origin. The idea for this study arose while my wife and I were compiling a Bulgarian-Korean dictionary.<sup>1</sup> Working on the dictionary for over 4 years, I made a list of interesting phrases which require definitions not only of linguistic meaning, but of extralinguistic, cultural, historical, and literary connotations.

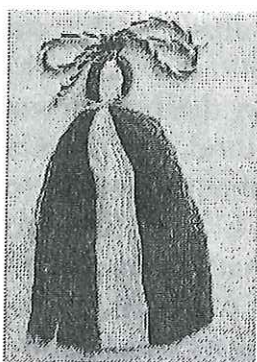
## 2. *The mutual interplay of the Bulgarian language and its culture*

### 2.1. "Честита Баба Марта" – 'Happy Grandma March!'

There is a very unique Bulgarian custom: on March 1<sup>st</sup>, every Bulgarian whom I meet greets me with this phrase. My students, majoring in Korean Studies at Sofia University 'Saint Kliment Ohridski', and friends give me and my family *martenitsas*, which always pleases me.

The most important thing on March 1<sup>st</sup> in the folk-customs is to wear a *martenitsa*, a twined tasseled red and white thread. It is a symbol of spring and health. In the past, Bulgarians hung twisted red and white thread only on their wrists, but later they began to wear it on the chest. It is worn especially by children and animals (sheep, dogs, etc.); nowadays it is tied on the rear-view mirror of cars. It is done so with a wish for good health and protection against 'evil eyes'.

When the person wearing a *martenitsa* sees a migratory bird, like a stork, a swallow and a cuckoo, he unties the thread and ties it on a branch of a live fruit tree in order to bring fertility and happiness. In the past, the *martenitsa* would be put under a stone, and according to the insects and bugs under the stone, people predicted what kind of year it would be and what the health and luck of the respective person would be (Ognyanova 2002:38).



Picture 1. *Martenitsa*.

Here is the beautiful legend describing the birth of the Bulgarian symbol, the *martenitsa*:

During the second half of the seventh century, Khan Asparuh<sup>2</sup> was already approaching the Danube. He drew the Bulgarian national

boundaries with his victorious march and his bloody fightings. Somewhere far from him, his wife Ahinora prayed to the God Tangra<sup>3</sup> to protect him and to crown his spear with the wreath of victory. Her thoughts of the fate of the Khan would come to her more strongly in the spring, when the forests turned green and the plants in the fields were in full blossom. She took each and every swallow flying in as a greeting sent to her by the Khan. One day, she caught one of the birds, tied a twisted white and red thread on its leg and let the swallow fly to the Balkan Mountains. In this way she made the first Bulgarian *martenitsa*. (An article in the newspaper *Sofyanets Trud*, 28 February, 2003:4)

*Baba Marta*, or Grandma March, is the only female personification of the months of the year in the traditional Bulgarian conception of the world. Most often, March is personified as an old woman with a bad temper. Early in the morning on the first of March, the Bulgarian housewives would put out red clothes on balconies, fences, or trees, hoping that capricious *Baba Marta* would not get angry. According to the Bulgarian common belief, she gets angry when she meets old women on her way, then thunders, goes into a fury and cries. When she sees, however, young lasses and lads, she smiles and is well-disposed. Then the sun shines.

In Bulgarian folktales, *Baba Marta* is represented as the closest kindred relative of her brothers *Golyam Sechko*, i.e. January and *Maluk Sechko*, i.e. February. Frequently in the mythology, the three personified months form a solidly united trio, which is connected to the myth of the twin gods with different sexes and the incest between them. Depending on the variations, *Baba Marta* is at times a sister or a wife of her brothers. Often she is not pleased with their sexual abilities or she is angry because her two brothers have drunk her wine. For that reason, the old woman (or the bride) flies into a rage and as a consequence the weather breaks, that is, rain, snow or slush falls. Especially popular is the folklore motif of an old woman who takes out her herd to a mountain in the last days of March. She thinks that *Baba Marta* is an old lady like her, so she will give her good weather. But exactly the opposite thing happens. *Baba Marta* gets angry at the goatherd and wants her brother, April, to lend her some days just to show what she is able to do. April gives her the days and she sends strong winds and snow. The old herdsman and her goats freeze to death in the

mountain and turn into a heap of stones, from which milk and curing water come out (Stoynev 1994:17-18).

So, the greeting mentioned above carries the following meaning: 'A new spring has come. I wish you good health; and that the weather during the month of March will not be (changing) capricious'.

2.2. 'Само главният секретар на МВР генерал Бойко Борисов е бялата лястовица на кабинета' – 'Only the Chief Secretary of the Ministry of Interior, General Boyko Borisov, is the white swallow of the cabinet'

This headline of an article appeared in one of the main Bulgarian daily newspapers, *Trud*, on September 20, 2002. First, we have to look into the world of Bulgarian mythology in order to understand what Bulgarians think about swallows.

According to a Bulgarian legend, the swallow was born from a bride. This bride was very shy and kept silent in front of her father-in-law and mother-in-law for more than 3 years.<sup>4</sup> Everybody thought that she was dumb and her husband decided to get a new wife. The second bride was taken into the house. Just before the second lady was dressed in her wedding dress, the bashful bride began to speak for the first time. She cursed everybody and flew up through the chimney. The father-in-law tried to catch her by the skirt, but only the lace was left in his hand. That is why the swallow has a split tail. After the incident, brides stopped keeping silent in front of the members of their husband's family for a long time.

To the Bulgarians, the swallow is a symbol of the coming renewal of nature and a symbol of the sun<sup>5</sup> and the life-asserting beginning. Swallows come to Bulgaria in the spring around the Feast of the Annunciation (Lady Day), March 25. Then farmers know that the new season has started. The *martenitsa* is taken off and is concealed under a stone to predict what the year will be like. In the Rodopi mountain region on the day of *Baba Marta* (March 1), children carve swallows from hazel and swing them with the help of strings. Carrying them, the kids visit the houses and congratulate the owners on the coming spring and sing special ritual songs with wishes for good health and well-being. The children are given eggs, ring-shaped buns, and dried fruits.

The solar symbolism of the swallow is shown clearly in the folklore motif of the marriage of the sun: 'The sun fell in love with a lass,

Grozdanka, and got married to her. The lady kept silent for 7 or 8 years. Then the sun made up his mind to marry Denitsa. The unfortunate Grozdanka asked God to turn her into a swallow.

It is a widespread superstition that no spell can be cast on the places where swallows have built their nests. There is happiness and richness in the houses with a swallow's nest. A swallow is not to be caught or killed because the parents of the wrongdoer will die. Spells of hatred are driven away with the help of swallow's nests. And in the Bulgarian folk remedies swallow's nests are used as a medicine against infertility (Stoynev 1994:204-205).

As we have seen in Section 2.1, the swallow was the first carrier of the *martenitsa* and is also a lovely creature of nature. This bird is regarded as a connection between the heaven (sky) and the earth (land), and between dear people. We can see an actual motif of the white swallow, beautifully expressed in the short story, *Po žitsata* (Along the telephone wire), a literary masterpiece by Yordan Yovkov (born on 9 Nov. 1880, - died on 15 Oct. 1937):

A very poor but good-natured country man from the northern part of Bulgaria is on his way to the village of Mandjilari. He is driving a carriage with one horse. The man stops at a village and asks Petur Mokbanina the way. Petur Mokbanina sees that a worried woman and a sick lass are on the carriage. The man tells his story: he is an itinerant vendor. He does not have any luck with the children – two children died, when little. The sick daughter, Nonka, is their only child now. So they have taken great care of her and given all their love to her. And she is now 20 years old. All her friends are married, but she still is not because she is of a poor family. This summer she went to harvest with the other girls. She slept in the field and woke up in the field. One day, they harvested all day, had dinner, sang songs and laughed. Nonka laid herself down between the sheaves, under a shock of sheaves and covered herself. While sleeping, she felt something heavy on her chest. She woke up and saw a snake coiled on her chest. She shouted out of fear, snatched it and threw it away. Since then the lass had been getting thinner and thinner. She says that she feels pain in her breast. No doctor can cure her. One day her godmother heard that at Mandjilari a white, snow-white swallow had appeared. She knew that a white swallow showed up once in a hundred years and that any sick person, who saw it, recovered from the illness, whatever the

disease was. Hearing this, Mokbanina noticed that there were so many swallows and storks on the telephone wire, getting ready to fly south. All of the swallows were black. Mokbanina had never seen and heard of a white swallow, but he said that there might be a white one, as there were white cows, white mice and white crows. When the sick lass asked him if she could see a white swallow, Mokbanina answered that he had seen it and assured her that she would see one and would be restored to health. Inspired, the poor family continued their way to the next village, Mandjilari. Mokbanina, making sandals out of horse leather, looked after the carriage and the swallows on the telephone wires. Looking up to the sky, he said, 'Oh, God, how much anguish there is in this world!' (Yovkov 1998:349-353)

A white swallow de facto is a very rare mutant, but the Bulgarians take it as something which brings them good luck. A white swallow is considered as a hope and a wish for something good. So the real meaning of the above sentence is 'Only the Chief Secretary of the Ministry of Interior, General Boyko Borisov, is the hope of the cabinet'. In Korean slang, the swallow means a 'playboy'. It would be extremely funny if we were to misunderstand the above Bulgarian sentence. Then, General Boyko Borisov would be the 'white playboy'.

### 2.3. 'Рогоносец' – 'An antler-carrier'

The symbolism of the antler-carrier is very old and extremely interesting: Byzantine Emperor Andronicus<sup>6</sup> issued a decree to put deer's antlers on the houses of the women with whom he had spent a night. In this way the Emperor privileged their husbands to hunt.

In the reign of Galeati Sfortia (also known as Galeazzo Sforza), Duke of Milan, the women did not think that it was a shame to spend nights with the duke, as their husbands received gold antlers and were greatly respected for that (Biedermann 2002: 196-197).<sup>7</sup>

The antler-carrier, though once dignified, now means a 'cuckold'. In connection with this, the word is used in the following phrase: Слагам (поставям, туряям) някому рога (lit. 'to put antlers on somebody'), which actually means 'to cuckold'.

Only with full knowledge of the etymology and actual meaning of the above-shown word and sentence can we understand the following joke from a Bulgarian daily newspaper:

A mulatto baby was born to a white man. The man went to beat his wife, but she explained:

- Um, well, when born, the baby was white, but I did not have breast milk and gave the baby to a Negress to rear it on her breast milk. While she fed the child, it became black.

The man regained his composure and went home. He sat down to write a letter to his parents and he wanted to boast of it. He described the incident with the black wet nurse.

After a few days he received a reply from his father.

'Dear son, when you were born, your mother did not have breast milk, either. So we fed you with cow's milk. I just wonder why right now antlers (horns)<sup>8</sup> are springing up on you'. (24 *Chasa*, April 24, 2003:40)<sup>9</sup>

I just hope that the son is intelligent and well-read enough to understand the symbolism used in the father's letter, and then to understand the situation.

#### 2.4. 'Земята да не те приеме' – 'May the earth (land) not take you in'

In order to understand the real meaning of the phrase, we must look into the essence of the traditional Bulgarian view of the land. The sanctity and purity of the land is a well-known concept among the Bulgarians, and also among other Slavs. This concept is well reflected in the belief that the earth does not take in the dead sinners. Consequently, the above utterance is one of the harshest damnations, though it sounds rather archaic in the contemporary urban language. An oath on a lump of soil is taken as holy. In the past, in Bulgaria, it was a tradition to take an oath on a handful of soil in case of quarrels. It used to be taken as a sign of truth and honesty, if a claimant took an oath on a sack of soil, with which he went to the field. In that case, nobody doubted the truth of his statement. This practice is based on the belief that it is a big sin to take a false oath on the soil; and after his death, the land will not take in the wrongdoer.

The earth plays an important role in some rituals. A plowman, for example, in his first ploughing of the year crosses himself, kisses a lump of soil, throws a bit of the bread he has brought and pours wine from a wooden vessel on the soil. The attendants at a burial service throw a handful of soil over the coffin and pour wine and olive oil on the grave, wishing for the dead person to be taken in by the earth. A lump of soil taken from the field used to be put on the dining table on Christmas Eve. It is a big sin to work with an unwashed face on the field. If there is no water on the field, the farmers may wash their hands with soil before eating because the soil is clean.

The earth is respected as a goddess of fertility, i.e., the mother of everything in the world. In some southeast Rodopi regions in Bulgaria, it is forbidden to plow the land on March 25, as it is believed that then blood will come out of the earth. Putting some ritual foods like a hen, wine, or bread at the first sowing is considered as a magical action for fertility and as an offering to the earth (Georgieva 1983:30; Choi 2002:47-63).

So the above sentence conveys a connotation of a harsh curse, 'You are so sinful that even the earth may not take you in, so even after death you cannot find peace'.

## 2.5. 'На седмото небе съм' – 'I am on the seventh sky'

In order to understand the actual meaning of the idiom, we need to look into the Bulgarian concept of the sky (heaven). The sky is believed to be a hard crust with seven tiers. The highest is the seventh tier, where God, the archangels and saints live. The stars are hung on the lowest tier of the sky and there are also the receptacles of the celestial elements like rain, hail, wind, etc. The spirits of the apostates and the blasphemers are being tortured on the second and the third layers. In this way, paradise and hell are given their place. The sun and the moon are on the fourth tier. The remaining tiers are for the remaining angels, seraphs and cherubs (Georgieva 1983:13; Stoynev 1994:226-227).

So the above idiom means in everyday usage: 'I am extremely happy, or I feel bliss (it is as if I were on the highest tier in heaven)' (Vutov 2002:253).



2.6. 'Бухали и кукумявки в къщата ти да бухат!' – 'May owls and screech owls hoot in your house!'

In the folktales, the owl (*Strix bubo*) and the cuckoo (*Cuculus canorus*) are represented as brother and sister:

One day a sick mother asked her son and daughter to bring her a pitcher with fresh water. They did not comply with the mother's request, because they had a quarrel about who should do it. The mother cursed them to turn into birds and then to hate each other and to be able to hear each other, without being able to see each other. With the help of God, the boy became an owl and the girl turned into a cuckoo. From that time on, the cuckoo calls his brother during the daytime, and at night he answers his sister. (Stoynev 1994:39-40)

As the living habits of the owls are naturally connected with night and darkness, the owls are perceived as demonic birds. Their whooping foreshadows misfortune, disease, or death.

In the Bulgarian folk concepts, the screech owls (*Athene nocturna*) are seen as identical with the owls. A screech owl is regarded as a demonic and deathlike bird. According to the traditional belief, it lives in desolate and solitary places and buildings. Its sinister hoot on the roof or on household chimney presages a death in the family, usually the death of the head of the homestead. That is why, if possible, the bird of Minerva is shooed away or killed. If somebody has started his journey and sees a screech owl, he should return back and delay work for the next day. Dreaming of a screech owl foretells that a misfortune will befall soon (Stoynev 1994:189-190).

With the knowledge of the implications which the owls and the screech owls carry, we can see that the folk curse means 'Damnation on you, you should die and your house should become desolate.'

2.7. 'Пътят на щъркелите' – 'the way of the storks'

Here is a legend about the stork:

Once upon a time the stork was a person. He was coming back from a pilgrimage, when God gave him to carry a coffer on his

back and told him not to open it. But the man had a great curiosity and did not keep the order. He opened the coffer, from which all kinds of reptiles came out. As a punishment God turned him into a stork and promised him to turn him into a man again, when he would succeed to gather all the snakes, lizards and frogs of the land.

According to another story, the stork is still a person. He came to us as a bird, just after taking a bath in the magical lake at the end of the world (Stoynev 1994:392).

The stork is a symbol of the sun, of the celestial flame, of health and prosperity. When seeing the first storks in spring, Bulgarians try to have money or bread in their hands, wishing to be rich and replete with food during the whole year. Then they untie their *martinitza*. It is believed that the places where storks build nests, are protected from witcheries and misfortunes. The Bulgarian folk tradition does not allow to kill a stork or to destroy a stork's nest. In the opposite case, the house (or the village) becomes desolate, the parents die and the orphan children scatter.

Many curative practices and witcheries for love are connected with the storks. A dried stomach of a stork is given to a childless woman so that she may become pregnant. A potion made by boiling straws and chips from a stork's nest is drunk for curing sterility. Lasses would give that kind of decoctions secretly to the lads to whom they want to get married. A stork's egg is believed to have the power to dispel all kinds of witcheries (Stoynev 1994:392).

In connection with the notions presented above, when a Bulgarian child asks his parents where he has come from, the parents usually answer that a stork has brought the kid to the family. So the phrase 'the way of the storks' metaphorically means 'the way of getting pregnant'.

## 2.8. 'Така му е писано' – 'It is written to him so'

This is one of the most interesting idioms, and it has attracted my attention for a long time. I have always wondered what is written where and by whom. We have to bring ourselves into the Bulgarian concept of fate to understand this phrase.

Bulgarians, even today, believe that fate is predetermined by the Fates (in Bulgarian, *orisnitsite*). The Fates<sup>10</sup> are mythical characters who

determine the fate of every person from the very moment of his birth. They are usually three sisters<sup>11</sup>, three lasses or women: the eldest is about 30-35 years of age, and the youngest is about 20. They are immortal. Their home is at the end of the world, in the palace of the sun. The Fates come at the first or third night after the birth of a baby. They come into the house through the chimney and hide themselves behind the door. They are dressed in white, but invisible. Only the grandmother-midwife or the mother of the newborn child can hear their prophecies. Though the Fates are envoys of God, he does not have any power over them at all. The destiny determined by them cannot be changed, even by God. When the Fates give prophecies, first the youngest speaks, at the end the eldest speaks. But what the eldest Fate, who is regarded as the worst in nature and the most powerful, says is the most important and decisive. The fate is left stamped on the forehead (or on the skull) of each person (Georgieva 1983: 137-139; Stoynev 1994:247-248).

Probably under the Christian influence, it has been allowed for the Fates to visit God, who tells them what destiny to predict, before they go to determine the fate of a newborn baby. What is determined by the Fates cannot be canceled even by the saints or by God himself. The image of the Fates, who write the life of the newborn baby in a notebook, is probably developed much later after the invention of writing systems. This image is built on the basis of the belief that speech has a magical power and that magical power becomes greater when it is materialized by the writing signs (Georgieva 1983: 138-142).

The consequence is compulsory ritual observances during the first or third night after the birth of a baby, aimed to propitiate the Fates: a table with food is prepared for them. A light is lit during the whole night. Objects with an apotropaic force – a harness, coins, a plowshare, a sickle, fire irons, a broom – are put beside the crib. A ring-shaped bread and a small bowl with honey are put close to the head of the baby, as the Fates like sweet things, and when they are full with food, they will be more favorable to the baby (Stoynev 1994:247). Then the Fates will speak (or write) a much better fate for the baby.

Now the meaning of the utterance becomes clear. Its real meaning is 'That is his fate'. My Bulgarian friends use it, usually when something very sad happens, for example, when somebody dies unhappily, or somebody suffers a serious catastrophe or a great failure.

## 2.9. 'Чукам на дърво' – 'To knock on wood'

The origin of the idiom is connected with old Greek mythology, more specifically with the Goddess Nemesis. In Greek religion, this goddess has two divine conceptions, the first – an Attic goddess, and the second – an abstraction of indignant disapproval, later personified. Nemesis, the goddess (perhaps of fertility) was worshiped at Rhamnus in Attica and was very similar to Artemis (a goddess of wild animals, vegetation, childbirth, and hunting). In post-Homeric mythology, she was pursued by Zeus, the chief god, who eventually turned himself into a swan and caught her in the form of a goose. Nemesis then laid an egg from which Helen was hatched. That Nemesis, the abstraction, was worshiped, at least in later times, is beyond doubt. She signified particularly the disapproval of the gods at human presumption, and her first altar was said to have been erected in Boeotia by Adrastus, leader of the Seven against Thebes. In Rome, especially, her cult was very popular, particularly among soldiers, by whom she was worshiped as a patroness of the drill ground (Britannica 2001).

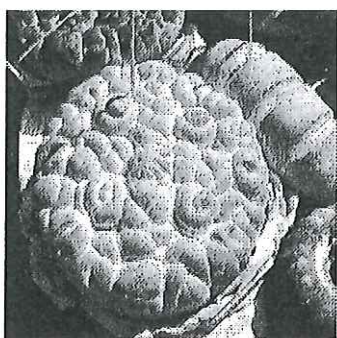
The retaliations which the goddess inflicts are not done at random. She just watches, so the haughty mortal human beings will not try to be equal to the gods. She will humiliate those who have excessive abilities. Nemesis calls for modesty and restraint<sup>12</sup> (Schimit 1995:158-159).

Bulgarians use this phrase very often. When I ask somebody whom I have not seen for a long time how he and his family members are, he says that they are fine and thanks me for the care and then knocks on wood or wooden things. Sometimes after the gesture of knocking on wood, he adds (or explains) that he does so, wishing for his self-praise not to be heard by the Devil. If he heard him boasting, the Devil would ruin his praise. We can see that the old Greek goddess Nemesis, from whom the idiom has originally come, is Christianized and replaced by the Devil in the Bulgarian folklore. It really took me a long time to understand the essence of the idiom and the accompanying gesture.

So the above phrase means that the speaker wishes that 'the good situations (things) he boasts of would continue to exist'.

2.10. 'Вземам хляба от устата на някого' – 'To take bread out of the mouth of somebody'

Bread is the most important food to the Bulgarians, as rice is to the Koreans. That is why bread figuratively represents or symbolizes the greatest spiritual values in the existence of people, i.e. their livelihood. In Christianity, for example, Jesus Christ is re-created figuratively as the bread from the heaven (in Bulgarian, *hlyab ot nebeto*) (Vutov 2002:473).



Picture 2. Bread specially made for a church ritual.

Thus the above sentence means to 'deprive somebody of his final means for subsistence or deprive somebody of the chance to work and to exist'.

There are so many idioms containing the word 'bread': 'Давам от хляба си' (to give out of one's own bread), meaning 'to show mercy'. 'Изкарвам хляба си' (to earn one's bread), meaning 'to earn one's living'.

A loaf of just baked, hot bread is very delicious. Thus everybody wants to buy and eat hot bread if possible. In connection with that, the phrase 'Книгата се продава като топъл хляб' (the book sells like hot bread) means 'the book sells like hot cakes'.

2.11. 'Посрещам някого с хляб и сол' – 'To greet somebody with bread and salt'



Picture 3. A traditional Bulgarian restaurant welcomes guests with bread and salt.

Salt takes a very special place in the traditional Bulgarian belief and customs. Salt can unite people and drive away evil spirits. So the wide-spread saying 'Къща без сол не бива' (a house should not be without salt)' implies that every house must always have salt. First of all, a salt-box is put at the dining table to give luck and fertility to the house. Thus the family should be kept safe from evils and witchery. When a newly-wed bride enters the new home, her mother-in-law ritually feeds her salt and bread. When a baby baptized at a church is brought into the house, it is given to eat salt and bread at the threshold.

A handful of salt is passed through the fingers of every dead person in order for fertility to stay at the house and for the soul of the dead person not to come back. Frequently, salt is given to domestic animals so that no bad things will happen to them. Every guest used to be met and sent off with salt and bread. Some demonic beings – The Fates, vampires, demonic diseases, witches – are propitiated and neutralized by salt. Salt can disperse hail clouds. When it hails, the women turn the trivet upside down and pour salt in the middle of it. The Bulgarian folk tradition prohibits throwing salt in a fire, as it is believed to provoke misfortune in the house and on the family. If somebody swears with salt in his hand, the swear will always end up in a victim. On big holidays salt is not given to lend, as the family is believed to get poor (Stoynev 1994:338-339).

The idiom shown above may actually mean that somebody meets a very important person with salt and bread, as such is done in official rituals. But its real figurative meaning is 'to meet somebody with great hospitality, with gratefulness and blessing' (Popov 1994:1042).

#### 2.12. 'В тая къща петел пее' – 'In this house a cockerel (rooster) sings'

20 January is a traditional Bulgarian folk holiday, *Petyovden*. The most important ritual on the day is to butcher a rooster. A rooster is killed only in the families with sons. The rooster's neck is cut off with a knife at the threshold of the entrance of the house, so the blood spreads around. Usually a young boy who is not yet matured sexually or his mother kills the rooster. Then she draws a cross on the boy's forehead with the rooster's blood, hoping that it will bring him good health and long life. He throws the killed rooster in the yard of the house and immediately picks it up. The cut-off head of the rooster is put in front of the entrance and the feathers are kept and used, when the boy gets sick. The mother of the boy makes soup out of the rooster and treats neighbors with the soup for the good health of the boy who is to succeed as head of the family. Besides the soup, the mother prepares small round loaves of bread, a traditional Bulgarian pastry, *banitsa*, and the like (Stoynev 1994:265; Ognyanova 2002:33; Vasileva 2002:144-145).

Before the Bulgarians adopted Christianity, they had a pagan, old Slavic feast. At the festival, they paid respect and praise to the men who were the supporters of the families and the tribe, and the workers

and the soldiers at the same time. The young men, dressed in splendor, enjoyed themselves, and were the objects of attention and care of the people of all ages and sexes. While Bulgaria was under the reign of the Ottoman Empire, the feast turned into *Petyovden*. At around the time of this festival, the Turks came to every house to recruit janissaries, soldiers for the Ottoman Royal Guards. Every year at this time, all the houses were filled with crying, screaming and tears. Blood was shed.

The Bulgarians called the recruitment for janissaries a 'blood tax'. The Turks made a cross on the gate of the house from which a boy was taken away. In the countryside women took notice of it and found a way to save their children. When the day for the feast came, they cut off roosters' heads, and with the blood of the roosters marked crosses at the entrance gates of their own houses. Later, a band of Turks came, saw the marks, thought that another group had come already to collect the 'blood tax', and then just went away (Nameranski 1993:22-25).

We do not know exactly how effective the trick was, but the holiday gained an aura of resistance against the Ottoman Turks. Nowadays it is observed as a day for the male offsprings and is called *Petyovden* (etymologically, a day of roosters), as the roosters are believed to safeguard the boys. The feast, anyway, is a male holiday for stimulating masculinity of the boys.

As we have indicated, the roosters in the Bulgarian folklore impersonate the male force. Thus the idiom above means: 'In this house the man (husband) commands'.

### 2.13. 'Върви ми по вода' – 'To walk on water'

Water is one of the basic and invariable elements in the creation of the world. According to the dualistic legends for the cosmogony, the earth was covered with water before the rest of the world was made. In the traditional Bulgarian concept, water is much more than the earth. According to the Christianized rationalization of the world, water was made by God because it was necessary to everyone and everything. Everyday life is unthinkable without water. Water is an object of respect and even of cult. According to the traditional belief, every body of water has its guardian, which appears in the form of an animal like a ram, a big frog, a fish, a lizard, a bird. But most often it is a snake with a semi-human head and wings. The guardian is believed not to do any harm to the people, so nobody teases it. In the water live various spirits,

which are shown in personified forms in the Bulgarian folklore concept. Those spirits are usually lasses, or women.

The attitude towards water is double-faced, that is, the spirits in water are perceived as forces carrying harm, but the people at the same time expect help from the spirits, i.e. from the water. It is a widespread practice to leave some token (for example, a thread from clothes, a



Picture 4. Accompanied by the Rector of Sofia University, prof. Boyan Biolchev (far left), the South Korean ambassador, Mr. Seung-ui Kim is preparing to pour a bucket of water at the opening ceremony of the University's Korean Center building in July 2003.

small stone) at springs or fountains so that misfortune may not befall one. This custom bears a meaning of sacrificial offering. It is believed that water has power to cure diseases. So a sick person goes to water for healing. And a sacrifice is offered into the water to propitiate the spirits in the water. All of these customs have come from a very old practice, by which the Slavs in the Balkan Peninsula have respected the rivers and wells, and offered sacrifices to them.

Bulgarian people believe that water has magical, purgatory, curative, and fruit-bearing power, which makes water play an active role in various rituals and curative practices. A sick person is undressed and doused with water at a crossroad at midnight. The action is accompanied by the following saying: 'Just as Jesus bathed himself in the Jordan, all the misfortunes and grime should be washed out of the sufferer'. It is clear that a Christian element has been introduced later in the ritual. The Christian religion has transformed the purgatory power of the water and its ability to expel evil spirits into a belief that water is holy. On *Yordanovden* (6 January, the Feast of the Epiphany)<sup>13</sup>, the priest steps a cross in a bowl of water, and then the water becomes holy. The priest sprinkles the houses and the believers with the sacred water for their good health.<sup>14</sup> A 'living water' (in Bulgarian *živa voda*) which can revivify the dead is a very frequently met motif in folktales (Stoynev 1994).

Water in the Bulgarian folklore conception is a traditional means for insuring success in every work. Thus the idiom shown above means 'to go well'. So when a child goes out of the house to go to the graduation ceremony, his mother pours a bucket of water in front of the house, wishing the child to 'walk on water', that is, to have a bright,



successful future. When a bride leaves the house in order to go to the wedding ceremony, she kicks down a bucket of water at the threshold of the entrance and walks outside over the spilt water. I understand that this action also means that her married life should 'go on water'.

#### 2.14. 'Надувам гайдата' – 'To blow (inflate) the bagpipe'

*Gayda* (bagpipe) is a traditional Bulgarian wind musical instrument. It is one of the most beloved instruments among the folksong players. A Bulgarian bagpipe has three pipes and one bag. The pipes are made

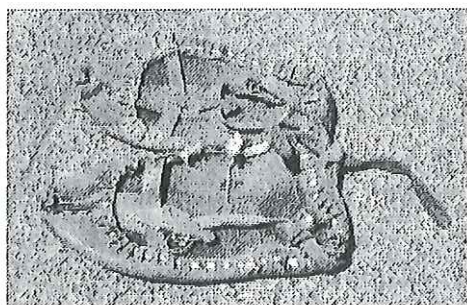


Picture 5. A bagpipe player at a park in Sofia.

from the cornel tree, the apricot tree, the cherry tree, the plum tree or other hard woods which can stand humidity. One pipe, called *dubalo*, is used to inflate the bag, the second one, called *rubilo*, produces a single tone and characterizes the sonority of the bagpipe. The third one, called *gaydunitsa*, is a straight single pipe with eight holes for sound. Seven holes are on the upper side and one hole is on the downside of the pipe. The bag is

made of kidskin. The kidskin for a bagpipe has been sheared and is turned inside out. The Bulgarian bagpipes are white, as they are not dyed (Sagaeв 1974:426-427; Chetrikov 1979:47-48).

As the bagpipe puts out the highest sound among all traditional musical instruments, its sound is metaphorically compared to a very loud, noisy cry. Thus, 'to blow the bagpipe' means 'to cry loudly'.



Picture 6. A pair of *tsărvuli*, Bulgarian moccasins.

In connection with the bagpipe, Bulgarians have another idiom: 'Цървули няма, гайда иска' – 'He does not have moccasins, but wants a bagpipe'. The Bulgarian moccasins (in Bulgarian, *tsărvuli*) are shoes made of animal skins, usually cows' skins. They were used in the past. They are not beautiful in design, but are indispensable articles in life. So the

phrase derisively shows that 'somebody wants something unnecessary, even though he does not have some of the necessities of life.'

### *3. Conclusion*

It was sometime at the beginning of my stay in Bulgaria when my wife and I were invited to a birthday party. We went to a shop to buy flowers and we chose two roses. But the saleswoman of the shop asked us what the flowers were for. We answered that they were for a birthday; then she insisted that we should have one more rose. So we bought three roses in total, but we were a little bit upset, thinking that the seller was trying to rob us. Later, we got to know that an even number of flowers is given on an unhappy occasion like a funeral ceremony, or when you visit a grave, while an odd number of flowers is given on a pleasant occasion like a birthday, or when you visit somebody as a guest. It is awful when I think of what would have happened if we had bought an even number of flowers for the birthday. Nonverbally, we would have said, 'Die on this birthday!', instead of wishing the host 'a happy birthday!'.

Here is one more example where a nonverbal gesture plays a very important role in communication with people from different cultural backgrounds. In Bulgaria, when making a toast in drinking, the two participants in the toast must look into each other's eyes; otherwise one is considered very rude. In Korea it is considered very rude to do so. When drinking alcohol in front of a more aged person, I even have to turn my face around. This is a polite Korean custom. Thus it took quite a long time for me to get accustomed to the Bulgarian custom of making a toast.

The idioms examined above are only a handful out of a huge body of linguistic material where the Bulgarian language blends with its history and culture. Those examples convince me, once again, that I have to understand not only the linguistic material, but also the nonlinguistic matters such as the Bulgarian history and culture, if I really want to master the Bulgarian language and to know the essence of the mentality of the Bulgarians. While living in Bulgaria, I, as a foreigner, am constantly encountering new linguistic and extralinguistic phenomena, which lead me to the wonderful spiritual world of the Bulgarians.

## THE BULGARIAN LANGUAGE AND ITS CULTURAL ENCODING

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### Notes

1. The dictionary was financially supported by the Korean Research Foundation, Seoul, Korea and has been published by the Sofia University Press, Sofia, Bulgaria in 2004. It is composed of two volumes with a total of almost 2000 pages.
2. Born in approx. 644, died in approx. 700. He was a proto-Bulgarian khan, the founder and the first ruler of the Bulgarian nation. He was in reign from 681 till approx. 700.
3. For the proto-Bulgarian supreme god Tangra, refer to Gwon-Jin Choi (2001:93-104).
4. It is an old Bulgarian tradition for a newly-wed woman to hold her tongue in front of her father-in-law, mother-in-law and the godfather for the first 3 years after the marriage. This was considered as a way of showing respect to them.
5. For the symbolism of the sun in the Bulgarian mythology, refer to Georgieva (1983:15-22) and Gwon-Jin Choi (2002:49-54).
6. There were four Byzantine emperors with the name Andronicus – Andronicus I Comnenus (reigned 1183-1185), Andronicus II Palaeologus (reigned 1282-1328), Andronicus III Palaeologus (reigned 1328-1341) and Andronicus IV Palaeologus (reigned 1376-1379). The German reference does not give us concrete information with which emperor the source of the concerned word is connected.
7. I am very thankful to Miss Sofia Elefteriu, a student majoring in Korean Studies at Sofia University, for having found this German material and for having translated it for me.
8. The Bulgarian word *rog* does not make any difference between the antlers and the horns.
9. На бял мъж се родило бебе мулатче. Тръгнал да бие жена си, а тя му обяснява:  
- Ами то, като се роди, беше бяло, ама аз нямах кърма и го дадох на една негърка да го кърми. Та тя като го кърмила, и то почерняло.

Успокоил се мъжът, прибрал се вкъщи, седнал да пише писмо на родителите си, да се похвали. Описал и случката с черната кърмачка.

След няколко дни получава от баща си.

'Скъпи сине, едно време, когато ти се роди, майка ти също нямаше кърма. Затова те хранехме с краве мляко. Чудя се само защо чак се ти поникнаха рога?'

10. In the Greek and Roman myths they are Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos. But they do not have individual names in the Bulgarian mythology.
11. In some parts of Bulgaria they are thought of as one man, or two or three men.
12. The forefinger that is put in front of the lips represents Nemesis, when we make a gesture to hush (Schimit 1995:158-159).
13. It is a widely spread custom in Bulgaria that, after a liturgy outside at that day, the priest throws a wooden cross across cold, often frozen water, then brave men jump into the water to get first the cross. It is believed the person who takes the cross will be in good health and with good luck for the whole year.
14. It is a general custom among orthodox Bulgarians to invite an orthodox priest to an opening ceremony of buildings, stores or offices. After a mass, the priest steps a cross and a bunch of flowers into water and with them he sprinkles water onto the object and the people present.

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